

Harkin: Food Policy Improves America's Well-being; Makes the Healthy Choice the Easy Choice; Protects Food Safety

"In the past decades, fewer and fewer Americans have had access to healthy foods and more and more of our diets have been filled with fatty, processed junk foods. This has led to an overwhelming increase in obesity and related diseases – a trend that is not just impacting our waistlines – it is impacting our bottom line with skyrocketing medical costs. That is why it is so important that we do all that we can to give people options. That starts by giving them confidence that the food they eat is safe, but we must also provide access to safe, healthy foods and to keep consumers informed about what is in the food they eat. This is not about telling people what they must eat – rather it is about making the healthy choice the easy choice."

- Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA)

Late last year, the President signed the *Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010* to extend and improve federal child nutrition programs. Included in this bill is a provision that requires national nutritional standards for *all* foods sold in schools. The enactment of this provision culminates a 15-year effort by Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) to establish such school nutrition standards. Additionally, the President has just signed the *FDA Food Safety Modernization Act*, long overdue legislation championed by Harkin that will better protect Americans against contaminated food and food-borne illness and overhaul our outdated food safety system. It is a bill that will, as the *Washington Post* reported, "overhaul the nation's food-safety laws for the first time since the Great Depression."

The enactment of these bills caps a remarkable period of policymaking by Harkin pertaining to food and nutrition policy. The effect of these efforts will reach nearly every person in America. Harkin is likely the most influential lawmaker identified with reforming and improving American food systems, affecting how school food is procured, the direction of federal food assistance programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the provision of nutrition information in chain restaurants, the nutritional content of foods sold in school vending machines and the viability of farmers markets around the country, among other things.

Key Harkin Food Policy Accomplishments in Recent Years:

FDA FOOD SAFETY MODERNIZATION ACT – As Chairman of the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP), Harkin worked closely with a bipartisan group of Senators over the past year to build a broad coalition of support for the bill, overcoming numerous challenges to see the bill through to final passage. With this legislation, for the first time, the FDA will have the power to issue mandatory recalls if businesses do not voluntarily recall harmful food, and will be able to more quickly trace contaminated food back to its source. Grocery stores and other food retailers will be required to notify consumers if they have sold dangerous food that has been recalled. These provisions, along with improved prevention of food contamination and disease surveillance, will provide Americans with much-needed peace of mind in the supermarket aisles.

FRESH FRUIT AND VEGETABLE PROGRAM – As Chairman of the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee, Harkin authored and established the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, which provides free fresh fruits and vegetables to elementary schools with high proportions of low-income children. Harkin established the program in the 2002 farm bill as a demonstration project. It quickly proved to be a popular and successful program, and Harkin secured \$1 billion for the program in the Food, Conservation, and Energy Security Act of 2008 (the farm bill). Once fully implemented, the program will serve as many as three million children in every state in the country

MENU LABELING – Harkin negotiated and authored a provision in the 2010 health reform bill, *The Affordable Care Act*, that will extend nutrition labeling requirements similar to those currently in effect for packaged foods to chain restaurants as well. Once implemented, all chain restaurants with 20 or more locations will be required to provide consumers with calorie information on the menu or menu board, and additional information in a supplemental pamphlet. Vending machine operators operating more than 20 locations will also be required to post calorie information.

SCHOOL NUTRITION STANDARDS – As mentioned above, Harkin was the primary author of section 208 of the *Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010*, which will establish, for the first time, nutrition standards for all food, including vending machines, snack bars, a la carte lines and school stores, sold in schools participating in the National School Lunch Program.

LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS

- **LOCAL PROCUREMENT IN FEDERAL NUTRITION PROGRAMS** – Prior to the 2008 farm bill, federal law actually prohibited the use of geographic preference for procurement of foods in federal nutrition programs, with a particular effect in the National School Lunch Program. To promote local foods in the School Lunch Program, Harkin authored a provision in the 2008 farm bill to remove the prohibition on the use of geographic preference.
- **LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS** – Harkin also authored several provisions in the rural development title of the 2008 farm bill intended to promote local and regional food systems, including a reserve of funds for local food systems in the Business and Industry Loan Guarantee Program and a set-aside for local food systems in the Value-Added Grant Program.
- **FARMERS MARKET PROMOTION PROGRAM** – Harkin also created the Farmers Market Promotion Program in the 2002 farm bill, and secured \$33 million in mandatory money for the program in the 2008 farm bill, the first time that mandatory money was devoted to the establishment and expansion of farmers markets.

HEALTHY INCENTIVES PILOT PROGRAM – Harkin authored a provision in the 2008 farm bill to incentivize purchases of healthy foods in the Food Stamp Program (now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program/SNAP). While this is only a demonstration program, it could have major implications for the future of SNAP, our nation's largest food assistance program, which currently serves over 40 million Americans. Harkin secured \$25 million for USDA to test a national experiment under which individuals participating in the SNAP Program would receive additional benefits when they used their base SNAP benefit to purchase healthy foods, such as the fruits and vegetables.

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